Dr Richard Schomburgk
and Adelaide Botanic Garden
1865 - 1891

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Abstract

Dr. Schomburgk's period as Director of Adelaide's Botanic Gardens 1865-1891 was a 'golden age' producing some major site developments which have survived to the present day. The Botanic Gardens functioned as a multi-purpose institution, carrying out functions later performed by the Adelaide Zoological Gardens, the Waite Institute, Roseworthy Agricultural College, the Woods and Forests Department and the C.S.I.R.O. Schomburgk was involved in important applied botanical research in horticulture, forestry and agriculture and contributed to South Australia having the first forestry department and first agricultural college in Australia: two of the earliest in the British Empire. His Museum of Economic Botany is the only one of its kind in an Australian Botanic Garden. His fine Palm House, unrivalled in Australia, is now considered to be of world heritage importance.

The Schomburgk era provides us with a case-study of colonial pragmatism in the field of institutional development. It will be argued that Schomburgk's success in obtaining considerable resources for site development, his capacity to work cooperatively with local businessmen (including nurserymen) and farmers, and the way he became 'the people's pet' in Adelaide were all developments that arose out of his own particular balance of knowledge and attitudes. He combined overseas experience with local experience, scientific knowledge with practical expertise, research skills with entrepreneurial flair, and had a capacity to balance the different functions of a botanic garden, (scientific and utilitarian, educational and recreational). His own very practical training taught him to work for a client, important when working for a colonial government, and facilitated cooperation with local nurserymen and farmers.
It will be argued that there were certain cultural factors in Adelaide society that played an important part in the support given to Schomburgk and the gardens. This case study demonstrates how the cultural milieu affected the work of a colonial scientist. Of these factors relating to cultural milieu, three stand out: openness to new ideas, a desire to obtain 'the best available' for South Australia and alongside this a desire for 'respectability'.

A further theme of the thesis relates to the transfer of plant material: its importance to Australia and its place in British imperial development. Schomburgk's approach was an international one. Probably the largest importer of plant material in Australia in his day he used international botanical contacts to obtain plant material (e.g. for wheat, sultanas, almonds) which benefited all Australian colonies. His contacts with colleagues in Germany, where he had been a protégé of the great nineteenth century geographer and scientist, Alexander von Humboldt, provided a link between scientific developments in Australasia and research in Germany. While scientific links with British colleagues were of great importance, Schomburgk's pragmatic approach saw him forging extra-imperial links with colleagues in continental Europe, North and South America and Java.

The Botanic Garden, one of the earliest scientific institutions in Australia, provided a beachhead for scientific development. A study of Schomburgk's career provides some insight into the role of one of Australia's first professional scientific workers and into a worldwide network of exchange for information and plant material.